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State Fire Marshal Offers Winter Holiday Safety Tips
There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan said, "There is no place like home for the holidays and a few simple steps will keep your home safe for your family and guests this holiday season." Coan added, "When we gather for the holidays, we usually gather around the table for a meal. Cooking is the leading cause of home fires throughout the year, and causes about one-half of fires during the holiday season."

On Christmas Day 2005, at 3:31 a.m., the Millis Fire Department was called to a cooking fire at a single-family home. Cooking oil had been left on top of an electric grill on the home's porch. The cooking oil ignited, starting the fire. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the residents. No one was injured in this fire. Damages were estimated to be \$2,500.

On New Year's Eve 2005, at 6:18 p.m., the Dedham Fire Department responded to a cooking fire in a 9-unit apartment building. The resident, a 39-year old man, had turned on his gas stove in the kitchen and had fallen asleep in another room. The stove had ignited a nearby plastic appliance. The resident was awakened by his smoke detectors. He was transported to a local hospital and treated for smoke inhalation. Sprinklers were not present. Damages from this fire were estimated to be \$500.

Prevent Candle Fires: Follow the Circle of Safety Rules

"So many of our holiday rituals involve candles, so we need to be especially careful with them at this time of year," Coan said.

On December 4, 2005, at 7:46 p.m., the Rehoboth Fire Department was called to a fire in a single-family home. An unattended jar candle in the living room burned down and broke the glass, igniting a paper Christmas decoration. There were no injuries associated with this fire. Smoke detectors were present and operated but no one was home to hear them. The total estimated dollar loss was \$40,000.

On January 2, 2006, at 4:45 p.m., the Brockton Fire Department was called to a fire in a 3-unit apartment building. An unattended and unenclosed candle in a front bedroom was allowed to burn down, with the hot wax burning the stereo wires and a nearby wicker basket. The fire was confined to the room of origin. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the residents. Damages were estimated to be \$750.

“When candles come in contact with holiday decorations, are left burning unattended, burn down too close to the holder, or are knocked over by pets or children, fires start easily and spread quickly,” Marshal Coan warned. “Please burn candles inside of a one-foot *Circle of Safety*, free of anything that can burn,” he added.

On December 14, 2005, at 10:56 a.m., the Scituate Fire Department was called to a fire in a 12-unit apartment building. The fire was started when a candle ignited a Christmas decoration. The fire was confined to the decoration. There were no injuries associated with this fire. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the residents. Sprinklers were present but it was not reported if they operated.

On December 17, 2005, at 8:57 p.m., the Norwell Fire Department was called to a structure fire in a single-family home. Candles on a small Christmas tree-shaped decoration on the mantel in the living room ignited the decoration. Firefighters extinguished the small fire. It was undetermined if detectors were present. The fire was confined to the decoration. There were no injuries associated with this fire. No estimation was made as to the damages from this fire.

On December 24, 2005, at 7:57 p.m., the Saugus Fire Department was called to a structure fire in a 30-unit apartment building. A wall-mounted candle ignited a holiday decoration. The fire was confined to the room of origin. Smoke detectors were present and alerted the occupants. There were no sprinklers present in the building. Total estimated dollar loss was \$2,000.

On December 24, 2005, at 9:23 p.m., the Abington Fire Department was called to a fire at a 12-family apartment building. An unattended candle hanging on a wall ignited a holiday decoration. The fire was contained to the room of origin. There were no injuries associated with this fire. Detectors were present and alerted the occupants. Sprinklers were present and extinguished the fire.

Electric Holiday Lights

Purchase new lights that are listed by an approved testing agency such as Underwriter's Laboratory (UL) or Factory Mutual (FM). Be sure to follow the manufacturer's directions.

Check lights carefully for frayed wires, broken plugs or sockets and loose connections. Hanukkah and Christmas lights are used year after year. Discarding and replacing damaged lights is less expensive than having a fire. When putting lights on a Christmas tree, make sure the bulb itself is not touching the tree. Keep decorations that use bulbs away from items such as curtains that could catch fire.

Turn off your tree lights and electric decorations whenever you leave the house and before you go to sleep. Lights can short circuit or overheat and start a fire. Avoid overloading extension cords, a common cause of fires, by using no more than three strands of lights on a single extension cord. Remember to never put cords under rugs or behind furniture that can “pinch” them.

Cut Tree Safety

- Water your live tree every day.
- Buy a cut tree as fresh as possible. A newly cut tree properly cared for, can stay green and fire safe for several weeks.
- Never use a cut tree in a place of public assembly (such as an office, apartment or hotel lobby, restaurant, etc.).
- Turn off the lights when you leave the house or go to bed for the night.
- Never use lighted candles as decorations.

How to Select a Tree

Lift the tree and tap the butt on the ground. If green needles fall off, the tree is too dry! Grab a branch near the top and pull your hand along it slowly. Needles should not fall off. The tree is already quite dry if you bend a needle and it breaks before bending in half.

Putting Up the Tree

Make a fresh cut an inch or two off the bottom to help with absorption, right before placing it in the stand. A tree will try to “heal its wound” by enclosing the previous cut in sap and this hinders water absorption.

Place your tree in a non-tip style stand with wide feet. Make sure it cannot be tipped over by children or pets. Use extra wires if needed.

Placing the Tree

Put trees and other decorations out of the way of traffic. Keep doorways and exits clear.

Place your tree and other decorations away from heaters, fireplaces, candles and all other sources of heat and flame. Heat makes your tree dry out faster and any heat source could make it catch fire.

Dispose of Your Tree Carefully

Remove your tree soon after the holidays. A dry tree is fuel for a fire both inside and outside your house. An abandoned tree is frequently attractive to vandals so take advantage of your community’s pick-up day if available.

Christmas Tree Fires Infrequent But Deadly

Since people stopped putting lit candles on Christmas trees and standards were set for electric lights, the number of Christmas tree fires has been significantly reduced. However, the National Fire Protection Association reports that those Christmas tree fires that do occur tend to be extremely dangerous. On average, one of every 22 reported home Christmas tree fires in the nation resulted in a death. Last holiday season there were no reported Christmas tree

fires, but in 2004 there were two significant ones that caused nearly one-half million dollars in damages to two homes and two injuries.

On December 27, 2004, at 5:20 a.m., the Stoughton Fire Department was dispatched to a fire in a single-family home. The family's Christmas tree, situated too close to a wood stove in the living room, ignited. The fire quickly spread to multiple rooms in the house. There were no detectors present and two people were injured in this fire. Damage to the home was estimated to be \$300,000.

On December 28, 2004, at 8:38 a.m., the Bellingham Fire Department was called to a single-family home to investigate a Christmas tree fire that had self-extinguished. The occupants had left the lights on the tree lit when they left the home. The tree had been up since the Saturday after Thanksgiving and was likely very dry. Smoke detectors were present and operated but no one was home at the time of the fire. Damages were estimated to be \$80,000.

Artificial Trees

Select an artificial tree with a flame retardant label. These are best for families who want a tree but will be away for several days or who may otherwise not be able to care properly for a live tree. Do not use electric lights on metal trees; faulty lights could charge the tree and electrocute anyone who touched it. Spotlights provide safer and more effective illumination.

For more information on fire safety, contact your local fire department or the Office of the State Fire Marshal at 1-877-9 NO FIRE or on-line at www.state.ma.us/dfs and look for Fire Safety Topics.